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Cold Case: Restoring Rebekah, Intrigue in Genesis 27

Abstract

Rebekah often is censured and criticized for her part in persuading Jacob (but disguised as Esau) to approach Isaac and to seek to obtain the patriarchal primogeniture blessings that should go to his older fraternal twin. Rebekah undoubtedly is at the center of the plot. She informs Jacob that he must act, and do so quickly. She makes her case and then she literally prepares the food and garments necessary for Jacob to appear as faux Esau. Following the blessing, she strongly advises Jacob to take a leave of absence. Most commentators suggest that Rebekah does this counter to Isaac's wishes, that she betrays her role as his wife. This article suggests that on the contrary, the Isaac-Rebekah relationship was and remains one of love and mutual respect. The "deception" is an Isaac-Rebekah jointly conceived plan; it is Jacob who is unaware, not Isaac. Rebekah's reputation requires restoring.

Keywords: Rebekah, Isaac, Jacob, deception, restoration

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Introduction

Rebekah often is reviled as a calculating and controlling wife and mother who cunningly directs the lives of her husband and sons. She is described as “the Machiavellian matriarch manipulating Jacob to defeat the purpose of her blind and dying husband.”¹ She is said to “usurp [Isaac’s] authority and use it for her own ends;” a woman who is “a manipulating schemer.”² These are harsh words; they condemn Rebekah out of hand. Furthermore these descriptions appear to run counter to the Rebekah-Isaac relationship prior to the “deception in the dark;” they likewise run counter to the Rebekah-Isaac relationship following Jacob’s receiving the primogeniture blessing. Certainly there is intrigue going on in Genesis 27, but who really is unaware of the true facts? Is it Isaac, or is it Jacob? Regarding Genesis 27 as a “cold case” that needs reinvestigation, this article seeks to restore Rebekah’s reputation by showing that this husband and wife work as a team. Further, the theft of the blessing is achieved through a conscious plan worked out, not by Rebekah alone, nor solely by a combined mother-son ruse. Instead, a close reread of Genesis 27 suggests that Isaac and Rebekah themselves plan out this scheme of deception. They are the co-conspirators working as a single-minded unit to achieve what they understand to be the greater good for the family, that Jacob becomes the link to the promised future, that the Patriarchs will be Abraham-Isaac-Jacob.

On a surface reading of the text, Rebekah seems to act contrary to Isaac’s intent. Contemporary commentators highlight the issue of favoritism, suggesting that this “family is divided, and the mother and father each pursue their own interests . . . Rebekah exerts all the maternal authority she can” to usurp Isaac’s wishes.³ “Her plans for the ruse” reflect a “calculated deception;” it is “treachery” on her part.⁴ “Rebekah [acts] calmly and without compunction . . . she prepares to wrest the blessings from ‘his son’ so that ‘her son’ might enjoy them.”⁵ Noting the “deep rift in the family” Rebekah is described as the “perceptive, domineering mother” and “Isaac, a weak, aging figure whose fatherly desire . . . is thwarted.”⁶

Other Readings of the Text

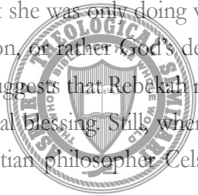
Yet even thousands of years ago, there were those who at the very least suggest that she has good reasons for doing what she does. The Pseudepigraphic work *Jubilees* expands Rebekah’s role. Abraham specifically tells her that Jacob is the favored son, and that God will choose Jacob, that Jacob will be a blessing “in place of me upon the earth and for a blessing in the midst of the sons of men” (Jub. 19.17). He says that he loves Jacob more than all of his own sons. Technically, this



could refer to children by Keturah as well (Gen. 25:1-4), but the inference is that Abraham prefers his grandson Jacob to his own sons, Isaac and Ishmael. Abraham says that Rebekah's hands should be strong and her heart should rejoice in Jacob (Jub. 19.21). In *Jubilees* chapter 25 Rebekah addresses Jacob at length. She tells him that he is to marry within the clan and, more specifically, a woman from her own father's house, for then his children will be a righteous generation and a holy seed (vs.1-3). She includes language reminiscent of God's early blessing to Abraham as well as Isaac's blessing to Jacob, "The one who blesses you will be blessed, and all flesh which curses you falsely will be cursed" (vs. 22, cf. Gen 12:3; 27:29). In *Jubilees* 26.24 Isaac actually mimics those very words when he blesses Jacob as faux Esau. *Jubilees* explains, "Isaac did not know him [Jacob] because the change was from heaven in order to distract his mind" (Jub. 26.18). James C. VanderKam suggests that *Jubilees* approves of Rebekah's "appropriate usurpation of the paternal role in blessing her son—something she could do because she, like Abraham and unlike Isaac, recognized his true character and superiority over his older brother . . . Something simply had to be done to avert his [Isaac's] ill-conceived plan, one that ran contrary to the insights of Abraham and Rebecca into the souls of the two young men."⁷ He goes on to write that whereas "in Genesis Rebecca's conniving and Jacob's compliance seem underhanded, in *Jubilees* they appear as commendable efforts by concerned people to thwart a disaster."⁸

In the midrashic writings, the rabbis choose to ignore the fact that on the surface reading of the text, Rebekah acts to thwart Isaac's wishes. Instead they praise Rebekah for her part in securing the blessing for Jacob. They say she convinces reluctant Jacob with two different arguments. First when urging him to fetch two goat kids from the flocks, she explains that, if necessary, he should take them from her dowry gift. Then she adds that two goats would in future time bring blessings to his descendants, referring to the rites for the Day of Atonement found in Lev 16:5, 15–22, 30 (*Genesis Rabbah* 65.14). Another midrashic collection connects Rebekah's relationship to Isaac to the capable wife in Proverbs 31:12. She was good to him, never bad (*Midrash haGadol*, comment on Genesis 24:58).⁹

In like manner, some of the Patristics praise Rebekah, again ignoring what seems to be the surface reading of the text, that what she does foils Isaac's plan to bless Esau. They argue that she was only doing what God wanted. Chrysostom speaks of "a mother's affection, or rather God's designs."¹⁰ Ambrose of Milan in "Jacob and the Happy Life" suggests that Rebekah recognized that Jacob was more suited to receive the patriarchal blessing. Still, when Origen objects to the phrase used by the Greek anti-Christian philosopher Celsus of the "treacheries of the



mothers” he nonetheless chooses a pejorative term for her action. Origen uses the word “contrived.” Celsus “means Rebecca when she contrived that the blessings of Isaac should not come to Esau but to Jacob.”¹¹

Alice Ogden Bellis explains that although “Rebekah is often viewed as a positive character from a feminist point of view, she is not well liked by male interpreters.”¹² Yet even feminist writers assume that in the matter of the “theft of the blessing” Rebekah acts autonomously of Isaac. For example Susan Niditch writes, “Rebekah thoroughly controls the action in Genesis 27.” She serves as the “trickster who formulates the plan and succeeds, moving the men around her like chess pieces.”¹³

That this is solely Rebekah’s plan is true even for Adrien Janis Bledstein’s comments. Bledstein suggests that Isaac approves of Rebekah’s actions, but she does not regard him a direct co-conspirator. Bledstein renames the characters by drawing on their etymological roots. Rebekah is Binder (connected to the root letters *resh-bet-quf, rbq*, tying fast), Jacob is Heel (*aqev*, heel, Gen. 25:26), Esau is “Hairy-man” (Gen. 25:25), and Isaac is Trickster (her reading of the word Isaac / *Yitzḥaq*). At the end of the day, Bledstein explains, “Isaac . . . is not deceived.”¹⁴ Isaac, according to Bledstein, has his own reasons for wanting to test Jacob. He wants to be assured of his second son’s “resolve and stamina,” therefore he puts Jacob through a series of trials. When it comes to Jacob drawing near and being smelled, Isaac as “Trickster smells him and may be pleased that even clothing has been considered by Binder [Rebekah] for the deception of both Hairy-man and Heel [Esau and Jacob]. Each time Trickster [Isaac] tests, either Heel’s [Jacob’s] response or Binder’s [Rebekah’s] preparation *permit Trickster to pretend to be deceived* by Heel’s hoax” (emphasis mine).¹⁵

One source describes Rebekah as a woman who is “gutsy, independent, and resourceful.”¹⁶ Another calls her “a powerful, influential matriarch . . . Her influence over Jacob and Isaac is evident: both seem to do her bidding, with little or no protest. Rebekah appears to be a master of intrigue . . . She is strong and daring and bold.”¹⁷ Undoubtedly Rebekah is resourceful, powerful, and bold. Yet a careful reading of the text of Genesis 27 suggests that the plan to have Jacob deceive Isaac is not Rebekah’s sole idea; it is a concerted plan pre-arranged by Isaac and Rebekah, working in tandem.

A Couple Committed to Each Other

This couple’s commitment to each other predates their actual meeting. Genesis 24 details the proxy courtship of Rebekah. Towards the end of the negotiations in Aram-naharaim, Rebekah’s family seeks her consent for this



marriage. She says clearly, “I will go” (vs. 58). At the end of that lengthy chapter, Scripture relates that Isaac, once she arrives in Canaan, greets Rebekah. He takes her and brings her to his (now deceased) mother’s tent. She becomes his wife and he loves her. Further, Isaac takes comfort in Rebekah, following the death of his mother Sarah (Gen. 24:67). That the text explains that Isaac loves Rebekah is a rare phenomenon in Genesis, never mind the Bible as a whole. To offer but a few examples: no such statement is found about the Abraham-Sarah relationship; Jacob does love Rachel (Gen 29:18, 30), but has ill feelings toward Leah. Genesis is silent about his regard for his other two wives. Joseph marries Aseneth but nothing is said of their marital relationship. In Exodus Moses weds Zipporah, but there is no description of his love for her. During the early monarchy, Saul’s daughter Michal loves David (1 Sam 18:20), but apparently he does not reciprocate those feelings, and while David lusts for Bathsheba, love does not seem to enter into the matter.

In the event, Isaac and Rebekah appear unable to conceive children. Instead of taking an extra wife to produce heirs, as did Abraham (Hagar: Gen 16), and as will Jacob (first Bilhah, then Zilpah, Gen 30), Isaac pleaded to God on his wife’s behalf (Gen. 25:21). The Hebrew says *Va-ye’tar Yitzḥaq . . . linokhah ‘ishto* --- (*nun-chaf-ḥet*) quite literally in front of his wife, which indicates that she is physically there with him. This is a couple that works in tandem, the inability to become pregnant is their problem, not hers alone. Later when she does conceive and eventually gives birth, together “they name” their son Esau (Gen. 25:25), and she may well be present when Jacob is named.

Quite a few years pass by. Isaac and Rebekah, now presumably in middle age, temporarily are living in Gerar. Isaac falsely asserts that Rebekah is his sister. One day the local ruler looks out a window and sees them together. He sees “Isaac fondling his wife Rebekah!” (Gen 26:8). The verb used here is *metzaḥeq*. That *metzaḥeq* comes from the same root as *Yitzḥaq*/Isaac – literally “he will laugh” (*tzadeh-ḥet-quf*) – gives an additional nuance to that word. The punning on his name is deliberate. Everett Fox translates the phrase as “laughing-and-loving.”¹⁸ This is a couple that has a full sexual relationship.

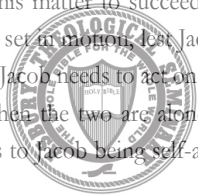
Chapter 26 ends with the information that Esau, at age forty married two Hittite women. “They were a bitterness of spirit to Isaac and Rebekah” (vs. 35). Again, the reference is to both husband and wife; together they share their sense of disappointment and anger with their son and daughters-in-law.

When in Genesis 27 Isaac instructs Esau to go to hunt game prior to the receiving the blessing, Rebekah is close enough to hear Isaac’s words (vs. 5). Presumably she is standing/sitting by him. Isaac wants Rebekah to know that Esau will be away for a few days; he is not secretly sending his son away.

The next time that we see Rebekah and Isaac together comes at the end of chapter 27. The blessing has been given; Esau is understandably upset and has resolved to kill Jacob. Someone tells Rebekah, who then warns Jacob. She urges him to leave home and to go to Haran, the location of Rebekah's brother/Jacob and Esau's uncle, Laban. The chapter then closes on these words: "So Rebekah said to Isaac, 'I abhor my life because of the daughters of the Hittites [i.e. Esau's wives]; if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of the Hittites – like these from among the daughters of the land – what would my life be worth?'" (Gen. 27:46). In the very next verse, the opening line of chapter 28, Isaac sends Jacob off to uncle Laban's home. Isaac does not consult with Rebekah, asking her, what should we do? Rebekah does not make any overt suggestions to her husband. Isaac on his own initiative does exactly what Rebekah had advised Jacob: leave your home and travel off to visit your uncle. Once again this is a couple that thinks alike, acts alike, and works as a team. When Isaac sends Jacob away, he blesses him and asks God to bless this son as well (Gen. 28:2-3). Indeed, in the next verse Isaac repeats the request that God should bless Jacob. This is hardly the reaction of a man who feels angry or disappointed that he has been duped or deceived in the dark. Isaac displays no animosity toward Jacob, and certainly no hostility toward Rebekah. Isaac agrees with Rebekah's advice to their son and he sends Jacob off with multiple blessings. Clearly he does not feel betrayed by Rebekah, nor does he feel that she has acted counter to his wishes. Isaac knows what Rebekah wants for Jacob, she does not have to spell it out for him. He knows what she wants because it is their plan, not hers alone. If she had acted in such opposition to his desires, why would he mimic her suggestion? If he had felt undercut by her part in helping Jacob, would he not also feel angry with Jacob? Yet nothing in the narrative even hints that Isaac is anything but willing and eager to get their son Jacob to go to Haran, and indeed to marry one of his cousins. Isaac is not ambiguous about this, he tells Jacob to do exactly that (Gen. 28:1-2).

The Deception Plan: Coded Language

Isaac and Rebekah need to come up with a credible strategy that will convince Esau to leave for a while, and which will also give her the time and opportunity to convince Jacob that he can safely achieve his goal of securing the patriarchal blessing. For this matter to succeed, husband and wife cannot be seen together once the plan is set in motion, lest Jacob become suspicious that his parents are manipulating him. Jacob needs to act on his own. He has to believe that he really is deceiving Isaac when the two are alone together; that Isaac is totally unaware of this deception. As to Jacob being self-aware enough that he is not yet



ready to “take up the burden of these blessings, that he is too immature to know how to act and what to do with them,” that Jacob has some “moral unease about what he is going to undertake” is quickly dispelled. His only “fear is – that instead of a blessing he will get a curse.”¹⁹ Jacob needs to take ownership of the scheme so that he will feel within himself that it was through his own actions that he won this primogeniture blessing.

Isaac and Rebekah’s scheme centers on the word YHVH, which is the special name for the deity. When Isaac actually sends Esau away to hunt game, he says to him: “Prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die” (Gen 27:4). Isaac makes no reference to the deity; it is simply a request from father to son. Yet when Rebekah reports this alleged conversation to Jacob, she deliberately changes the wording, making reference to the deity, and more specifically to the name YHVH. She tells Jacob that Isaac’s statement to Esau was, “Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, *with YHVH’s approval before I die*” (Gen. 27:7). The addition of the term YHVH becomes the hidden cipher, the code word, one that will make clear to Isaac that Rebecca has been successful in her undertaking to delude Jacob. There was no way that Rebecca can inform Isaac that she successfully convinced Jacob to play-act the part of Esau. She is fully occupied in cooking the appropriate dishes, dressing Jacob in Esau’s special clothes and fastening the goatskins on his neck and arms. As mentioned above, had she gone to see Isaac, Jacob might be suspicious. Rebecca’s reference to the deity in the context of securing the blessing for her second son also is a way to affirm God’s earlier statement to her, “the older shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23).

When Jacob is with Isaac he brings the prepared meal. He then asks his father to give him (faux Esau) the special innermost blessing. Isaac asks what seems to be a logical, if innocent question. “How did you succeed so quickly, my son?” Jacob expects this question. He understands that the primogeniture blessing is directly associated with the patriarchal tradition, one intimately with his father Isaac’s, and grandfather Abraham’s relationship with God. Consequently, in his reply, he consciously refers to the deity’s special name. Jacob replies, “Because YHVH your God granted me success.”

Of course, Isaac’s question was not an innocent one at all. In a matter of nine verses he challenges Jacob many times (vss. 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26). This is Isaac’s way of making sure that Jacob has to strain to achieve the blessing; it cannot be too easily achieved. Isaac is fully aware who is before him. Jacob speaks merely one word, “Father” before Isaac replies, “Yes, which of my sons are you?” (vs. 18).



Isaac may be of limited sight, but he still possesses voice recognition. In a short while he speaks the most famous of his lines, “The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau” (vs. 22).

Jacob’s earning the blessing, even surreptitiously is the first step in the two-part plan of Isaac and Rebekah. Once he has done this, earning Esau’s rightful wrath, Jacob puts his own life in danger. Esau has a temper. Up to this time Jacob has been a homebody, a man of the tents (Gen. 25:27). He will only leave the parental encampment if he has to do so, if he is less fearful in going than in staying. When both his parents give him the same advice, to leave for the safety of his uncle Laban’s home, he finally does exactly that.

Isaac and Rebekah understand that Jacob is the better choice of their sons when it comes to carrying on the special relationship with God. Esau has married local women, not once, but twice. They are a bitterness to both his parents. When Jacob will arrive in Paddan-aram/Haran he will follow Isaac’s command, he will take a wife, indeed two concurrent primary wives from his mother’s family. He will become fruitful and numerous.

Conclusion

Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob each in their own way have roles to play. Jacob needs to feel inwardly that he has taken on a large and difficult task successfully, indeed that he has overcome danger to earn this blessing. When negotiating with Rebekah, Jacob says correctly, if Isaac thinks that Jacob is mocking him, he will curse him (vs. 12). Isaac cannot openly deny Esau the primogeniture blessing, nor does he want to appear to wish him harm. If Isaac appears to be tricked, he can infer that he was innocently deceived. In turn, Rebekah needs to be seen as if she is acting on her own, pursuing her goals, not that of a combined parental strategy. Consequently, in order to have the plan succeed as well as it does, both Isaac and Rebekah need to appear to be in disagreement. Rebekah allows herself to be seen as a schemer and manipulator. She qualifies for both of those terms for she is at the center of this intrigue, but this is not her work alone, it is Isaac and Rebekah’s joint venture. In reopening this “cold case” we see that this is a couple that works in tandem to achieve what needs to be done. The “deception” is an Isaac-Rebekah jointly conceived plan; it is Jacob who is unaware, not Isaac. Rebekah’s reputation requires restoring.



End Notes

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*. Vol. 2 of *Word Bible Commentary*. Dallas: Word Books, 1994, 208.

² Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, and Hara E. Person. “Central Commentary, *Tol’dot* 25:19–28:9: Shaping Destiny: The Story of Rebekah.” In *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, [133–49]. New York: Women of Reform Judaism, 2008, 142.

³ Iain Provan, *Discovering Genesis: Content, interpretation, reception*, London: SPCK, 2015, 156.

⁴ Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 246.

⁵ David W. Cotter, *Genesis, Berit Olam, Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Michael Glazier, 2003, 200–201.

⁶ John E. Hartley, *Genesis*, New International Biblical Commentary, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2000, 246, 247.

⁷ James C. VanderKam, *Book of Jubilees*, Guides to the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹ Quoted in Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, 128.

¹⁰ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 46–67*, Translated by Robert C. Hill, Washington, DC, Catholic University of America, 1992, 81. See also *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament II, Genesis 12–50*, Mark Sheridan, ed., Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 168–169 for comments by Chrysostom and Quodvultdeus. Other Patristics’ views are also presented in this section.

¹¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, Translated by Henry Chadwick, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953, 218.

¹² Alice Ogden Bellis. *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Voices in the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007, 83. Bellis’ division between feminists and male interpreters is overstated. Many males are feminists.

¹³ Susan Niditch, “Genesis”, *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, ed., London: SPCK, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2012, 37, 36.

¹⁴ Adrien Janis Bledstein, “Binder, Trickster, Heel and Hairy Man: Rereading Genesis 27 as a Trickster Tale Told by a Woman,” *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, Vol. 2, Athalya Brenner, ed. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, 283, 287. [282–295].

¹⁵ Bledstein, “Binder, Trickster,” 289.



¹⁶ Eskenazi and Person, “Central Commentary, Tol’dot”, 136.

¹⁷ Janice Nunnally-Cox, *Foremothers: Women of the Bible*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981, 15.

¹⁸ Everett Fox, trans. *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*. Vol. 1 of *The Schocken Bible*. New York: Schocken, 1995. NRSV translates the verb as “fondling,” as does Speiser, NAB [the New American Bible, a Roman Catholic translation], New Jerusalem Bible [Roman Catholic], the JPS’ *The Contemporary Torah*, and NJPS-TANAKH. NIV and Revised English Bible has “caressing,” and NEB “laughing.”

¹⁹ Cotter, *Genesis*, 202.

